



The Boy Who Grew Up To Be A Chimp

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Images

In the 1940s, an era of classic child stars, movie audiences were particularly captivated by a little English boy who had gone to America to escape the World War II blitz of London. With experience and talent to back up his wide-eyed, soft-voiced appeal, he was the natural successor to Freddie Bartholomew, and rapidly became a box-office winner in two of the best loved 'boy-and-animal' movies - *Lassie Come Home* and *My Friend Flicka*.

Around twenty-five years later, he was captivating a new generation of movie-lovers in another series of animal-oriented movies, with one major difference. This time he was the animal! he is, of course, Roddy McDowall, who adored his friend Flicka, inspired Lassie to come home, and became a cult sci-fi figure as Cornelius and Caesar, the super-chimps of *Planet Of The Apes* and three of its sequels, and as Galen in the TV series inspired by the movies.

With the release of all five of the *Apes* movies on FoxVideo, Roddy McDowall will no doubt be charming audiences all over again, as he has been since the tender age of ten.

He was born in London in 1928, and by the age of five was acting in school plays; by ten he had made his British film debut in *Scruffy*, and by the time his father sent the family to America to avoid the bombs, he had appeared in sixteen films.

In Los Angeles, he screen-tested for 20th Century-Fox studios, and was chosen for a key role in John Ford's *How Green Was My Valley*, although he actually made his American debut in Fritz Lang's *Man Hunt* (1941) while waiting for the Ford film to start production. When *Valley* was released in late 1941, Roddy McDowall was an instant hot with audiences and critics, and within two years was one of Hollywood's top juvenile stars, mainly through the enormous success of *Flicka*, its sequel, *Thunderhead, Son Of Flicka* and of course, *Lassie Come Home*.

The trouble was that Hollywood wanted him to stay a juvenile. "There was an unspoken conspiracy against my ever growing

up," he said, when at the age of 20 he was still being offered teenage roles. More adventurous parts came only from studios that were at best minor, at worst poverty-row cheap, and by 1952, he was fed up with the movie scene.

The transition from child to adult movie actor has always been a difficult one, and Roddy McDowall was determined not to follow the path of those youngsters who had been driven to drink, drugs and even suicide by failure. He wanted to survive as an actor, and took a realist view of the situation. "I decided I didn't know what acting meant," he said. "I had to learn my craft".

So it was goodbye for Hollywood, hello New York, and he was off the big screen for eight years while he built himself a reputation as an adult actor in live TV and on the Broadway stage in such hits as *Camelot* and *Compulsion*, although later he missed out on the film versions of both.

He returned to Hollywood in 1960, but it took another eight years before he really hit the jackpot with fans - in the first, *The Planet Of The Apes*, based on the novel by Pierre Boulle (author of *Bridge On The River Kwai*) and co-starring Charlton Heston, Kim Hunter and Maurice Evans. As both a thriller and and a sly satire on human attitudes, it was, and is, a 'class act' among sci-fi movies, its intelligent script complemented by imaginative design and the brilliant Oscar-winning ape make-up by John Chambers.

Sequels were inevitable. In 1970, James Franciscus pursued

Charlton Heston *Beneath The Planet Of The Apes*, the only one in which Roddy McDowall did not appear, and Roddy was back in 1971 in *Escape From The Planet Of The Apes*, the best of the sequels, in which German actor Eric Braeden made a big impact as a villainous government official trying to destroy the apes who have managed to slip through a time-warp into the 1970s. With this film, Roddy McDowall assumed top billing, and Ricardo Montalban joined the team in a role he would repeat the following year in *Conquest Of The Planet Apes*, with Roddy now playing his own son, Caesar.

By 1973, Roddy McDowall was the only surviving member of the original star cast, when *Battle For The Planet Of The Apes* brought the series to a somewhat inglorious end. With its skimpy sets, generous use of footage from earlier films and trite plot, it looked like a flung-together telemovie, and it was no surprise when the TV series turned up shortly afterwards. Blandness had set in, and the audacity and imagination that had made the first films so exciting had been ironed out to such a degree that even Roddy McDowall seems disinterested.

Since the demise of the Apes, Roddy McDowall has had a spotty career, and has never quite hit the movie heights again, but he can always be relied on for a biting characterisation. And no matter what he may yet do as an actor, he will always be remembered as the owner of Flicka and Lassie, and as the most lovable talking chimp in movie history.

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